

## Problems of Suburbia

David Riesman

The trend toward suburbanization in the United States had started in the 1880s with the arrival of streetcars, but it accelerated sharply in the years after World War II. In many ways, the new homogeneous communities, full of upwardly mobile young families, seemed to typify the vigor and optimism of the postwar period. But there were negative aspects of suburbanization as well. In the 1940s and 1950s, many writers criticized the impact of suburbs on the people who lived in them and on American society in general. The selection that follows is from a work by sociologist David Riesman, called "The Suburban Dislocation."

In the days of Lincoln Steffens and later, people emphasized the "shame of the cities," and in the Twenties major novelists emphasized the constraints of small-town and occasionally of small-suburban life. Today, the comparable worry . . . is conformity: writers point to the uniformity of the ranch style, the everpresent television antennae, the lamp in the picture-window (which usually provides a view of the nearly treeless street, the cars, and someone else's picture-window). Observers have been struck by a kind of massification of men in Levittown and other housing developments such as was once postulated for the endless residential blocks of the cities created by the industrial revolution. . . .

. . . The city today, for many, spells crime, dirt, and race tensions, more than it does culture and opportunity. While some people still escape from the small town to the city, still more are escaping from the city to the suburbs. . . .

. . . I have not stressed here the vicious circle of urban decay and Negro and poor-white in-migration which, for many middle-income families, contribute an additional push from the city quite apart from the direct appeal of suburban domesticity. . . .

Although upper-class and upper-middle-class people have lived in the suburbs of our great cities since the 1880's or earlier, the cities before World War II still retained their hegemony: they engrossed commercial, industrial, and cultural power. The city represented the division and specialization not only of labor but of attitude and opinion. . . . The city, that is, provided a "critical mass" which made possible new combinations—criminal and fantastic ones as well as stimulating and productive ones. Today, however, with the continual loss to the suburbs of the elite and the enterprising, the cities remain huge enough for juveniles to form delinquent subcultures; but will our cities be able to continue to support cultural and educational activities at a level appropriate to our abundant economy? . . .

Where the husband goes off with the car to work (and often, in the vicious circle created by the car, there is no other way for him to travel), the wife is frequently either privatized at home or must herself,

to escape isolation, take a job which will help support her own car, as well as the baby-sitter.

The children themselves, in fact, before they get access to a car, are captives of their suburb, save for those families where the housewives surrender continuity in their own lives to chauffeur their children to lessons, doctors, and other services which could be reached via public transport in the city. In the suburban public schools, the young are captives, too, dependent on whatever art and science and general liveliness their particular school happens to have. . . .

. . . the suburban kaffee-klatsch is proverbial in which the women sit around and discuss their children—the main "surrogates" they have in common. Their husbands, working downtown or in a nearby plant, have some opportunity to meet people on an occupational basis who are of different backgrounds, different ages, and different life chances than they themselves; but the wives, falling into or forced into a neighborly gregariousness, tend to see others of similar age setting, and TV exposure. . . . cross-sex friendships are ruled out by lack of sophistication in such relations and by the lack of privacy. And the husbands, if not the tired businessmen of legend, are less eager than some of their wives to drive long distances at night for out-of-suburb contacts. . . . In this situation, many women of college education feel trapped, aware of falling behind their own ideals and their husbands in breadth of view and nourishing experience. The various leisure time activities they undertake do not seem to fill this void. . . .

Indeed, for millions of suburbanites, their post-War experience has been prosperous and open far beyond their Depression-born expectations. For them, the suburbs have been one vast supermarket, abundantly and conveniently stocked with approved yet often variegated choices. . . . Life on credit has worked out well for many such home owners, allowing them to have their children young, and in circumstances far better than those in which they themselves grew up. . . . such first-generation suburbanites [have] found the taste of abundance pleasant and, for the younger ones with wages rising faster than prices not notably problematic. But what will occur when the urban qualities have been dissipated, while the suburban ones elude all but the rich

### Consider:

1. Whether Riesman uses stereotypes in discussing the problems of people who lived in suburban communities;
2. The problems Riesman sees for American society as a whole as a result of postwar suburbanization;
3. Whether Riesman's predictions about life in the cities have been borne out.